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RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0111
RUEHPK/AMCONSUL KARACHI 0160
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 0082
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 0096
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0121
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 0434
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000666

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (SNELLSIRE)

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TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN CELEBRATES NEW PRESIDENT'S 50TH
BIRTHDAY LESS OSTENTATIOUSLY

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Jennifer L. Brush for reasons 1.
4 (B) and (D).

Summary

¶1. (C) From uniform praise to media-covered receptions to commemorative coins, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov's 50th birthday week provided a glimpse at how he is reflecting but also departing from the presidential culture of the late President Saparmyrat Niyazov. While there were some signs of a new emerging personality cult, what occurred paled in comparison to Niyazov's excess and highlighted -- without deifying -- Berdimuhamedov: stadiums that under Niyazov would have been filled with 40,000 well-wishers were empty, streets were not lined with waving children, and stages where plays once mythologized the president were dark. Nor was there a national holiday. Berdimuhamedov's version was softer and less self-directed. Yet, while he boycotted most of the birthday events, he did not put the brakes on them, and even as former President Niyazov's photos are disappearing, they are merely being replaced with the new president's photos.

End Summary.

MINISTERS SING "ALL HAIL TO THE KING"

¶2. (C) Several days before his birthday on June 29, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov announced he did not want national celebrations or events. In fact, he said, he was not in a position to order any such festivities. Nonetheless, in Niyazovian style, the Cabinet of Ministers held a televised conference and reception in his honor two days before his birthday, during which Foreign Affairs Deputy Chairman Rashit Meredov and others offered up fulsome speeches praising the many accomplishments of

Berdimuhamedov's first six months. A common theme in all of the speeches (compiled in English, Russian, and Turkmen in a book distributed to the entire diplomatic corps, which was required to attend) was the New Revival and Great Reform policy of Berdimuhamedov. Deputy Chairman Meredov, who has generally shown a positive disposition toward U.S. delegations this year, bolded in the printed English version of his speech the section on U.S.-Turkmenistan cooperation, the only section in the entire book that was formatted in bold. However, the guest of honor did not attend the event.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MR. PRESIDENT"

¶3. (C) On the morning of Berdimuhamedov's birthday, the Cabinet of Ministers, Mejlis (Parliament) leaders, welayat hakims (provincial governors), higher education rectors, the media, and other government officials gathered at the Presidential Palace to honor the president. Local newspapers published front-page the wishes of foreign executives and dignitaries. Afternoon and evening events followed, which Berdimuhamedov also did not attend. A concert dedicated to the president and his birthday was held in the Rukhyet Palace's cavernous hall. Flag-waving school children, feverishly-clapping government ministers and leaders, and generally bored, yawning diplomats sat through 18 song-and-dance performances. A gold and velvet throne for the president sat empty in the center of the floor, and a large poster of Berdimuhamedov towered over the stage from the back curtain. While two of the performances were congratulatory in nature, none specifically revolved around the president. After the concert, Mejlis Speaker Akja Nurberdiyeva and Deputy Chairman Meredov hosted a government reception for the diplomatic corps and foreign business representatives.

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REMOVED, AT TIMES REPLACED: BERDIMUHAMEDOV'S MIXED BAG

¶4. (C) Despite the press-covered conferences and receptions in his honor, some removal of past cult and excess marked the week leading up to Berdimuhamedov's 50th birthday. The date itself was not declared a national holiday, nor did it coincide with another holiday. Concert performances were more congratulatory than mythologizing. A number of Niyazov portraits were taken down from buildings and the golden Niyazov profile that had appeared 24 hours a day in the corner of Turkmenistan's state-run television station broadcasts disappeared. (Comment: Some opposition news media incorrectly reported that Niyazov's profile was replaced with Berdimuhamedov's. End Comment.)

¶5. (C) In some cases, however, the discarded Niyazov photos were replaced with Berdimuhamedov's own, most notably on important government buildings, such as the Oil and Gas Ministry. And a photograph of Berdimuhamedov has now replaced the picture of Niyazov hanging behind news casters. Additionally to mark the birthday, commemorative coins were minted with Berdimuhamedov's image; his biography was published; and the Mejlis awarded him the "Motherland" Order, a new order created for this occasion which carries with it a \$20,000 bonus, thirty-percent pay raise, and gold and diamond-studded chain.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) In a country where glorification of the leader had become religion, it is not surprising that vestiges would remain under Berdimuhamedov. It is uncertain whether these past developments or the recent events and accolades were the work of Berdimuhamedov or his handlers. And it is premature to conclude whether the mixed bag of activities signifies simply a consolidation of power or, more troubling, the

continuation of leadership by personality cult.

¶7. (C) Certainly, Berdimuhamedov's birthday week involved elements reminiscent of, if divergent from, his predecessor. Although his face is now on coins, television, and more and more buildings, it still does not come close to the unbridled excessiveness of Niyazov. Only time will tell the limits of his sense of entitlement, given the steady increase in Berdimuhamedov imagery and propaganda since the start of his presidency. Additionally, Berdimuhamedov has been careful not to criticize Niyazov, while simultaneously discontinuing some of his predecessor's unpopular excesses. Berdimuhamedov may be trying to keep Niyazov a prominent person in Turkmenistan's history but discreetly let his cult fade. And if the president were to criticize Niyazov, he might unintentionally suggest that power is not perfect -- a message Berdimuhamedov will not want to send, as he has most, if not all, of the system's political authority.

¶8. (C) Berdimuhamedov's unassuming persona is unlikely to generate a cult of personality similar to Niyazov's; however, he may view the benefits, particularly for job security, too great a temptation to resist unchecked presidential authority. If the birthday week was any indication, Berdimuhamedov appears to be resisting this inclination less and less. End Comment.

BRUSH